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ANALYSIS OF THE AUSTRALIAN "HAIRY MAN" (YAHOO) DATA

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ABSTRACT: Reports of "hairy men" (Yahoos) in Australia for the period 1871–1912 are examined. The relatively small number of eyewitness accounts are characterized by a low level of detail, conflicting descriptions, and a high level of second-hand reportage. The analysis of individual sightings suggests that most can be explained by encounters with isolated Aboriginal males interpreted in the light of a developing settler myth. The evidence for the existence of an unknown primate in the area is very poor.

INTRODUCTION

Groves' (1986) paper on the historical Australian hairy bipeds (Yahoos) has provoked a certain amount of controversy. Rejecting the unknown primate hypothesis, he explained the stories as frontier myths on a par with the Tantanoola Tiger and the moa legends of New Zealand. An outsized wombat was suggested as the basis of one report, an outsized kangaroo for another, and the rest were dismissed as "a hotchpotch of shooters' campfire tales, unidentified apparitions seen at dusk, and various hairy horrids." Bayanov (1987) and Joyner (1987) thereupon took him to task for attempting no detailed analysis of the reports. Groves (1987) countered by saying that the reports tended to be inconsistent, and contained a high proportion of "noise" to "signal." The following year, he published an analysis of six variables in the original reports, and came to the same conclusion (Groves 1988).

The present paper is intended to provide a more thorough examination of Joyner's first (1977) publication, on which most of the controversy is centered, and to raise an explanatory hypothesis. The data consist of articles from various publications, mostly newspapers, which Joyner has numbered from 1 to 29. Three areas are covered: Aboriginal beliefs, European settler beliefs, and purported eyewitness reports.

The Aboriginal beliefs are recorded, by and large, by people whose knowledge of Aboriginal culture and experience in dealing with Aborigines is not stated, but we must expect a certain amount of cross-cultural confusion to have intruded. Also, as Groves (1986) pointed out, the traditions are extremely varied, some referring to tribal renegades and others to fantastic creatures with mythological overtones. In short, although the existence of an unknown primate would go a long way towards explaining the traditions,

they could just as easily be the result of the human imagination's well-known propensity to create manlike monsters.

The settler beliefs are also of limited value. They are presumably dependent on original sightings, but the information content would have deteriorated in the transmission. The beliefs would also have created a climate of expectation, which, in turn, would have clouded the interpretation of any genuine sighting.

It is to the twelve eyewitness accounts, therefore, that we must turn for information. Two methods of analysis are presented here. The first is to abstract the descriptive details from the reports to highlight the similarities and differences. The second is to analyze the reports one at a time, and attempt to provide a mundane explanation where possible. In all cases, the numbers quoted are those used by Joyner for his articles. This practice was also adopted by Groves (1988), and allows easy cross-referencing.

Analysis of Physical Details

The first thing one notices about most of the reports is the remarkable lack of detail. Many consist of just a sentence or two, and even longer descriptions are vague. In the case of the Braidwood beast, for example, where a dead female body was available for inspection, the witnesses neglected to record such an elementary detail as whether or not it was a marsupial. Apart from being a poor basis on which to form an hypothesis, this suggests a lack of critical standards by the population involved, and a concomitant tendency to jump to conclusions. Be that as it may, the following details can be culled from the accounts. Behind each detail is the number of the article from which it has been abstracted. The Braidwood beast [10] [11] is excluded at this stage because it is clearly aberrant.

Height: 5 feet [1]; "about the same as her grandfather" [4]; "somewhat larger than a man" [9]; over 6 feet [12]; "stature of a man" [13]; 7 feet [17]; between 5 feet, 8 inches and 5 feet, 10 inches [19].

Build: slender proportions but chest well developed [1]; "an old man whose back is bent" [4]; "the appearance of a huge monkey or baboon" [9]; "huge animal in an erect posture" [13]; "like a blackfellow" [15]; "like a black man" [15]; "man-like" [16]; "a great trunk all one size from shoulders to hips" [17]; human shape, enormous body frame, with a stomach hanging like a sack halfway down thighs [19].

Body Surface: "every particle of the body except the feet and face was covered with black hair, with a tan-coloured streak from the neck to the abdomen" [1]; "thick coat of hair" [4]; "covered with long hair" [12]; "like a blackfellow with a blanket on him" [15]; "coat was as hairy as that of a gorilla" [16]; "a tall man with a fur cap and a pea jacket" [18]; "body, legs, and arms were covered with long, brownish red hair," shorter on the arms, while the hair on the shoulders and back was jet black and long [19].

Head and Face: "back of the head straight, with the neck and body, but the front of the face projected forward, with monkey features" [1]; "head sunk into chest" [16]; "face . . . like that of an ape or man, minus forehead and chin" [17]; very small, very human, eyes large, dark, piercing and deep set, horrible mouth with canines which protruded when mouth shut [19].

Arms: long, with well developed muscles [1]; nearly reached ankles [17]; "extremely long and large, and very muscular" [19].

Hands: "nails of tremendous length" [4]; hand print showed little finger set like thumb [17].

Legs: "like a human being" [1]; fibula much shorter than a man's, but femur very long, out of all proportion to the rest of the leg [19].

Feet: "18 inches long, and shaped like an iguana, with long toes" [1]; footprints "resembling an enormously long and ugly human foot in the heel, instep and ball, had only four toes—long (nearly 5 inches), cylindrical, and showing evidences of extreme flexibility" but hallux not opposable [17]; metatarsals very short, phalanges very long [19].

Sounds: bellowed like a bullock when it hurt its foot [12]; howling and yelling [13]; bellowed [16]; growled, grimaced and thumped its chest [19].

Some of the accounts described the animal as being erect, and nearly all implied it, though nos. [1], [17] and [19] also mentioned quadrupedal locomotion. The emphasis on hairiness implies that the creatures were otherwise man-like, and the estimated heights are the same as in humans. A tail is never mentioned, and in two cases its absence is specifically noted. Neither genitals nor female breasts are ever mentioned, though in Victorian times this would not be unusual.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that a marked lack of detail coexists with marked inconsistencies, particularly in the form of the hair, legs, and feet. Furthermore, some witnesses reported striking details which should not have been missed by others. Groves' (1987) criticism on this point is certainly valid.

Theoretical Considerations

What is to be made of all this? Before this question can be answered a number of factors must be considered.

The first is the quality of the evidence. Experience shows that, in the face of the unknown, people's perceptions are often heavily influenced by social expectations, and are frequently sensationalized. Readers can no doubt provide examples of their own. I myself can remember how the night-time sighting of a "lion" south of Brisbane once initiated a string of "lion" reports until the feral dogs actually responsible were identified. Similarly, I know of a case in southeast Queensland in which an animal was shot that was described as being the size of a large dog, with the skin of a pig, mane of a lion, gait of a kangaroo, and the external attributes of both sexes. It turned

out to be a large, male feral dog which had lost all its hair, except on the neck, to mange mites, which had also infected its nipples, causing them to swell like those of a lactating bitch. Not only had its admittedly unusual features been described in the most sensational terms, but a completely extraneous feature, the "gait of a kangaroo," had somehow been introduced into the story.

With these experiences in mind, we should be prepared to discount some of the sensational aspects of the Yahoo stories. To add to our caution, it should be noted that two of the witnesses were children of unstated ages, and at least four of the accounts are second-hand—even discounting the cynical view that the retelling of a story by a journalist automatically makes it second-hand. Certainly, the witnesses' precise words are recorded in only a few cases. A fairly high level of reporter error must therefore be expected.

Secondly, there is the sheer improbability of an unknown primate existing in Australia, where the only other eutherians are bats, rodents, and the dingo, which was itself introduced by man. Moreover, the eucalypt forests of this region form a habitat totally different from that of other primates, and one in which it would have faced serious competition from the much more efficient Aborigines for at least 40,000 years. Furthermore, the accounts all emanate from the years 1871 to 1912. If a real unknown animal were involved, sightings would have become more and more common as the Anglo population increased. Footprints should be even more numerous. (This is an area where few people would go barefooted.) This has been the case with the North American Sasquatch, but, despite more recent sporadic rumors of "Yowies," this is not the case in Australia. There are strong grounds, therefore, for expecting a mundane solution to the problem.

The hypothesis explored in this paper is that reports of "hairy men" refer to just that: hairy men, isolated Aboriginal males whose physical features were sufficiently striking to confuse the credulous Anglo settler. At a time when tribal society was breaking down under the impact of Anglo settlement, degraded and antisocial individuals are likely to have been fairly common.

It is important not to read into the accounts more than is actually stated. The phrase "covered with hair" usually brings to mind the thick pelage of an ape, especially to those raised on tales of the Bigfoot and Yeti. It may, however, mean something quite different. On our own beaches are often seen individuals whose hairiness is striking: thick, curly hair covering not only the chest but also the abdomen, shoulders, and part of the back, not to mention the arms and legs. When the same individual sports a scruffy beard and mop of hair, and belongs to a race different from the observer's, his unexpected appearance may well be misinterpreted. Anthropologist Frank Poirier was, after all, mistaken for a Wildman when in China (Poirier, Hu, and Chen 1983), and the Australian Aborigines, as a race, are just as hirsute as Caucasians. Also, those in southeast Australia tend to be more heavily

built in the shoulders and chest than their northern relatives. Even the sounds attributed to the creatures would be made by humans in similar circumstances.

What about the references to "ape-like" features? I mean no offense, but the fact is that all human races possess "ape-like" characteristics which draw the attention of those who do not share them. In the case of the Australian Aborigines, these include heavy brow ridges, receding foreheads, broad, flat noses, and a marked prognathism. Any exaggeration of such features might well be classed as "ape-like" by people who had never seen a real ape or—more than likely—even a good photograph of one. Even so, the words "ape" and "monkey" appear more often in the articles on settler beliefs than in the eyewitnesses' testimonies.

Every year, a number of North Americans are mistaken for deer by overenthusiastic hunters, sometimes resulting in their demise. Nevertheless, many people may still find it completely preposterous that a human being could be mistaken for an ape. It would therefore be best to quote two recent newspaper reports.

The first is from the Brisbane *Sunday Mail* of February 22, 1987.

DESERT FAMILY STICKS TO "MONSTER" CLAIM

Alice Springs.—Relatives of a family chased by a huge "half-man, half-beast" in the central Australian desert are convinced they saw a monster, despite police having arrested a man nearby.

Alice Springs woman Phyllis Kenny, her four grand-children and friend Frank Burns, were chased by what they described as a terrifying "yowie-like" creature eight days ago at an isolated bore on Yambah Station, 50 km north of Alice Springs.

Mrs Kenny said the creature leapt from an empty tank at the bore, chased and caught hold of their utility truck before disappearing into the bush.

The man-like animal was covered with hair and stood at least 2m tall.

The two adults and four children were rabbit-shooting and decided to stop at a favorite camping spot, Top Bore, for water and tea.

It was 5 p.m. and still fully bright.

A large fig tree was beside the bore. They had some kangaroo tail with them, Mrs Kenny was passing around food and the two elder boys, Daniel Kenny and Ronald Dodd, were some distance away.

Daniel was the first to see the creature. "He was in the tank," he said. "He leapt out, not climbing out, but just straight out of this big tank."

Daniel and Ronald ran towards Mrs Kenny and Mr Burns. "Then, Nanna (Mrs Kenny) saw it and shouted out to jump in the ute" [the utility truck], Daniel said.

Ronald said: "It was coming towards us, not making any noises or anything or waving, just walking towards us."

Mrs Kenny said yesterday she had not slept properly since the sighting and was too scared to leave the house.

"When I saw that thing coming towards me, I nearly died," she said.

"You can tell the difference between a man and a beast—and that was no man."

"There are some things that you just can't explain, that are just scary, and that was one of them."

Daniel said: "It had a sort of ape's face. It had big eyes, a large forehead and it was all red around its mouth."

Ronald said: "It ran like a gorilla. Its arms hung down at its sides and it just sort of loped along."

But Mr Burns said: "I think it was a man. He looked like a man to me."

Police said yesterday a patrol arrested a large naked man in the area the day after the Kenny family's fright.

Constable Sean Sandry, of Alice Springs police, one of two officers to arrest the man, said he was "definitely not a yowie."

"We had a call from Yambah Station and we went out to see what was going on," he said.

"We found this bloke sitting on the side of the road completely naked."

"He was a great big bloke, about six foot eight, and I reckon he would have weighed about 20 or 25 stone" [280–350 lb].

"But he didn't give us any trouble. He just came along peacefully and hopped in the back of the van."

Police took the man to Alice Springs Hospital. He was admitted.

The race of the "apeman" was not mentioned in the above dispatch. In the next report, from the Brisbane *Telegraph* of July 28, 1987, he was definitely European and fully clothed.

"APEMAN" TURNS OUT TO BE "RAMBO" THE HERMIT

Recluse's Bizarre Forest Lifestyle

Sydney.—Police hunting the Woronara apeman have been told the "creature" is a Yugoslav hermit known as "Rambo" who has been living in a national park for years.

"It's not an apeman, it's 'Rambo,' " the locals of the Heathcote Inn said today.

The "Rambo" tag refers to nomadic hermit Franjo Jurcevic, a 53-year-old Yugoslav who has lived in the Heathcote National Park for as long as anyone can remember.

But his bizarre lifestyle is not totally isolated. On pension days he comes out to get liquor supplies at Heathcote, including beer, whisky and port.

"He comes up about 10 am on pension days and gets his supplies," Heathcote Inn barman, Buck Rogers, said.

"I can see why people would think he's an apeman. He has hair everywhere and wears a bandana round his head."

"But he's not 7 ft tall and he doesn't seem ferocious."

Locals have told police "Rambo" wears jungle boots, stained jeans and a murky-colored shirt.

"He never talks to anyone when he comes in," publican Ces Partland said. "He just takes his grog, along with fruit and veggies, and off he goes. He may be a bit short with people but he's certainly no Rambo."

But police fear they may gain no new information on the wild man of Woronara because he often lies low for very long periods of time. Officers at Engadine, who investigated sightings last Saturday night, said the creature may not be seen for years.

"It might be a while before he is sighted again."

Included in the report was an artist's impression of how a witness saw the "apeman" carrying an animal carcass.

Case by Case Analysis

Let us now examine each of the eyewitness accounts, beginning with the simplest.

[9] A four line article which simply states: "The animal, if such it be, has the appearance of a huge monkey or baboon, and is somewhat larger than a man." This description is too bare for any conclusions to be reached.

[15] Two second-hand reports, both with a minimum of detail. The first states: "Joseph says it was like a blackfellow with a blanket on him." The second tells of a creature killed by Aborigines at some unspecified date in the past: "It was like a black man, but covered all over with grey hair." Nothing in these accounts would suggest that the subjects were anything but human.

[18] This consists of a single sentence from a letter, and it is uncertain whether it is a first- or second-hand report. "It appeared to be a tall man with a fur cap and a pea jacket, and running with a peculiar attitude." No doubt he was wearing some cast-off European clothing.

[4] A little girl "asserts that she has met an old man, whose back is bent, and body covered with a thick coat of hair—in height (to use the girl's words), about the same as her grandfather. The strange being in question had nails of a tremendous length . . ." The child was probably telling the unvarnished truth. The amazing thing is that any adult was amazed at it.

[12] A boy—of unstated age—saw a "wild man or gorilla" which appeared from behind a tree and ran away from him. His description was limited to two sentences: "The boy states that he appeared to be over six feet in height and heavily built. He describes it 'as a big man covered with long hair.' " No doubt that is what it was. Its behavior was also quite in keeping with that of a human.

[13] [16] Here we have two second-hand reports from the pen of a Mr. John Gale. One concerns a Mr. Cox, who saw "a huge animal in an erect posture tearing through the undergrowth" making a noise between a howl and a yell. The complete description of the animal is covered by that short phrase. Obviously, no conclusions can be based on anything so vague. The second refers to a sighting by the Webb brothers. It took place during the short Australian twilight, when visibility would be limited. No indication is given of the lapse of years between the initial sighting, its report by the Webbs, and its retelling by Gale, but it is probable that it was long enough for distortions to creep in. Certainly, the story told by Gale in 1927 is different from the 1903 version. In the earlier story, the creature was merely "hirsute," and left no trail of blood after being shot at, but 24 years later its coat was "as hairy as that of a gorilla" and it left "distinct traces of blood." Furthermore, in the later version, the brothers waited till morning to examine the trail, and a herd of stampeding cattle had been introduced, perhaps from

the story of Cox's encounter. It is not often that we have such an opportunity to observe the evolution of a legend.

The following is a summary of the description from both versions: hairy; of similar size, stature, and gait to a man; head set very deep between its shoulders; loud vocalizations; no response to the brothers' challenge; and man-like footprints with the long, spreading toes of one who normally goes barefooted. It would not take much to make a man out of these data.

[17] This is the Bombala beast, which Groves considered to be a large kangaroo. It is another second-hand story, but probably more reliable. The sighting took place at midday, little more than a week before being reported. The creature appears to have been less than 150 yards from the witness, but the height of 7 feet may still have been overestimated.

It was described as being covered in grey hair, with the face of an ape or man, minus forehead and chin, trunk all of one size from shoulders to hip, and arms nearly reaching the ankles. This is very different from a kangaroo. However, if the length of the arms is exaggerated—and this feature is not emphasized in any other report—it could easily have been a big, hirsute Aborigine.

Its behavior was also man-like. It was drinking on all fours; i.e., the man was probably kneeling at the water's edge, or, more likely, squatting. If he had his knees drawn up by the sides of his body, it would explain why the witness initially mistook him for a kangaroo. Afterwards the creature picked up a stick and walked away like a man.

The following day, the writer examined the creature's tracks. The hands were said to have the little finger set like a thumb, while the feet had only four toes, all very long. This pattern is very unusual for a primate, and it would be interesting to know how clear the prints were, and the nature of the soil in which they were found. It would not be difficult for human hands and feet to leave such marks.

[19] This refers to the creature seen by Charles Harper in the Currickbilly Range. At first glance, it might be considered the ideal report: a detailed description written by the eyewitness himself. In fact, it has many defects.

In the first place, Harper gives no indication as to how long before the sighting had taken place. If the time gap had been short, he would probably have mentioned it. It is more likely that many years had elapsed, a period during which his memory had accentuated the strange and dramatic elements of the experience.

Secondly, the sighting took place at a distance of twenty yards, which is quite a long way at night, even with a large campfire. It can be safely assumed that the visitor had kept to the outer limits of the light. Yet, Harper gives a detail which he could not possibly have seen: "The eyes were large, dark and piercing, deeply set."

Let us take the most unlikely feature first: "The fibula bone of the leg was

much shorter than in man. The femur bone of the thigh was very long, out of all proportion to the rest of the leg." It is hard to believe that *any* biped could be built like that and still walk efficiently. No other report mentions such a peculiarity, and it throws a cloud over the whole of the rest of the description. Since Harper claims to have caught only occasional glimpses of the feet, the extreme length of the toes was also probably an exaggeration.

Another unique feature was the abdomen, which "seemed like a sack hanging halfway down the thighs." Gross obesity would have been rare among Aborigines at that time, but not unknown, and this one was probably wearing a sack-like garment.

The rest of the description would fit a hirsute, heavily-built Aborigine. The hair on the shoulders and back appeared jet black, as distinct from the reddish brown body hair. This suggests a mop of typically human head hair. "The head and face were very small, but very human," though some of its teeth protruded. In departing, it walked a few yards erect, "then at a faster gait on all fours through the low scrub"; i.e., it left the field of vision by crawling or stooping under the low foliage.

The last two reports do not fit the hirsute Aborigine theory.

[1] The details given by George Osborne may be summarized as follows: 5 feet high, general primate shape, covered with black hair except for a tan streak on the ventrum, with feet 18 inches long, shaped like an "iguana's" (i.e., an Australian monitor lizard, *Varanus* sp.). "It walked quadruped fashion, but at every few paces it would turn around and look at me following it, supporting the body with two legs and arm, while the other arm was placed across the hip." No human being would act like that, but it is also certain no native mammal of similar size could climb down a tree as this did.

The best explanation I can produce for this story is that it is a hoax. To dispose of inconvenient data in this manner may seem like special pleading, but the fact is that practical jokes do occur. Furthermore, the credibility of this story is compromised by the inclusion of striking features unsupported by other reports, such as the ventral streak and the outsized and outlandish feet.

[10] [11] The Braidwood beast, killed by A. Marrin, was definitely aberrant. The cardinal points are as follows: female; weight over 7 stone (98 lb); 4 feet from top of head to rump; no tail; face like a polar bear's; 11 inches across the forehead; tan colored with strong hair. Also: "Its four legs were shaped just like a man's arm and about the same length, and the feet were shaped like a man's hand with the palm precisely similar and toes which had a close resemblance to fingers with overgrown nails." It was not noted whether or not the animal was a marsupial, though one would have thought the presence of a pouch or the position of the nipples would have been worthy of note. No mention was made of such important characteristics as the teeth, ears, or shoulders.

Clearly, this is not a primate. The shape and size of the face precludes that, and the weight is low for even a female ape with such an elongated torso. Despite the uncharacteristic behavior of standing on its hind legs, I am inclined to accept the interpretation that it was a wombat (Groves 1986, 1988). The journalist who saw the carcass was not prepared to rule this out. One thing is certain: the animal was quite different from all the others previously described.

Conclusions

When a house has a reputation for being haunted, every creak, bump, or shimmer takes on sinister connotations. Similarly, when "hairy men" are rumored to lurk in the forest, every stray, antisocial native is likely to become the subject of anecdote. My analysis of the southeast Australian data strongly supports Groves' (1986) interpretation of the stories as frontier myths which faded when the first generation of settlers had passed away.

Critics might argue that I have deliberately discounted much of the evidence. This would be a valid criticism under normal circumstances, but when the evidence is contradictory, much of it *has* to be discounted. The reports cannot all be accurate, and I think I have sufficiently demonstrated that the witnesses were quick to jump to conclusions, slow to provide concrete details, and that, all too often, what details we have are second-hand. The kernel of truth that is left is subject to quite mundane explanations.

Researching old and obscure documents is a very time-consuming job, and by undertaking it Joyner has rescued from oblivion an important part of his country's cultural heritage. However, unless the stories are supplemented by more modern ones of a more reliable nature, they should be considered the province of the folklorist rather than the cryptozoologist.

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